



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Review of Tales from the Mall by Ewan Morrison

Citation for published version:

Crosthwaite, P 2012, 'Review of Tales from the Mall by Ewan Morrison', *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 136, pp. 128-130.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Edinburgh Review

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Crosthwaite, P. (2012). Review of Tales from the Mall by Ewan Morrison. *Edinburgh Review* 136: 128-130.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Please refer to the published journal for citation purposes.

Tales from the Mall. Cargo Publishing. ISBN 9781908885012. PBK. £9.99
Ewan Morrison

In his 1995 book *Non-Places*, the French anthropologist Marc Augé remarks that 'a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place'. Passing one another as solitary, atomised individuals, visitors to non-places navigate environments from which every trace of the historical past has been excluded, and in which their own identities are recast in generic terms: as driver, customer, traveller, guest. Such spaces – motorways, supermarkets, airports, hotels – exemplify our modernity (or, as Augé would have it, our 'supermodernity'), and none more so than the shopping mall.

In taking these overlit, anonymous, hermetically-sealed structures as the subjects and settings of a book consisting, in substantial part, of pieces of short fiction, Ewan Morrison faces a dilemma: how to summon up emotion, pathos, or epiphany in spaces apparently designed to tranquilise any such intensely cathected expressions of personal history and experience? As one of a pair of 'newly separateds' reflects in the book's first story, malls are favoured locations for absent parents to have access time with their children because they are 'neutral space[s] without prior emotional associations'. As it turns out, however, the very blankness and sterility of the mall serves time and again, in Morrison's stories, to induce a kind of *horror vacui*, as spasms of rage, panic, and despair proliferate across the gleaming concourses and temperature-controlled atria.

Here, a child is lost somewhere in the polished no-man's land between Burger King and Build-a-Bear; a businessman searches for the site of his childhood trauma beneath the tarmac expanse of a mall car park; a Tesco's cashier resorts to shoplifting to suppress her 'dejas' – a disturbing ability to foresee the future, brought on by the monotony of the checkout; an advertising executive collapses in Habitat, overwhelmed by the array of household products and the fulfilment they seem to promise; a market researcher contemplates suicide when she realises that her life is reducible to the demographic type targeted by a new shopping mall; and a woman's horror at the domestic ubiquity of self-assembly, wood-effect furniture generates a profound phobia of IKEA.

In these short fictions, Morrison succeeds in locating humour, poignancy, and desperation in the homogeneous mall-land that sprawls across and around his home city of Glasgow, a landscape which could (and this, of course, is his point) be anywhere. Perhaps the most substantial and affecting story – the penultimate fictional piece, entitled 'Borders' – begins in the iconic year of 1989 and offers a time-lapse portrait of two decades in the life of a young man as he drifts into and out of radical politics and goes on to accumulate and discard jobs, lovers, cars, hobbies, credit cards, tattoos, recipes, and prescriptions before finally meeting his grimly ironic fate in – where else? – the storeroom of a shopping mall. The story powerfully captures the jitteriness, incoherence, and ambivalence of contemporary life – itself, Morrison implies, nothing more than a vast repository of disposable consumer options.

Morrison's stories amount to a compelling and desolate vision, but they form only one of three strands of his book. Interspersed between these fictional snapshots are anecdotes recounted by those who work and shop in malls in Scotland and the United States and instalments in a history of shopping centres, from the Athenian Agora to Westfield. This combination of genres invites comparison with the idiosyncratic writings of W.G. Sebald, Iain Sinclair, and Douglas Coupland (the latter two, indeed, enthusiastically praise Morrison's book). Maintaining a distinction between modes that Sebald and Sinclair, in

Please refer to the published journal for citation purposes.

particular, renounce in their frequently unclassifiable blends of fiction, essay, memoir, and travelogue, Morrison's work, however, proves to be less innovative in formal and stylistic terms than such resemblances might initially suggest.

One area in which *Tales from the Mall* does assume a distinctly radical edge, however, is in its provocative but persuasive identification of peculiar incidents in the lives of malls as forms of 'urban folklore' akin to the traditional songs and stories preserved by archivists like those in the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Morrison is quite aware of how distasteful some will find this alignment of contemporary mall culture with deep-rooted folk cultures, but if, as he contends, the 'mallification' of Scotland is 'an historic event, as important as the Jacobite Rebellion and the Highland Clearances', then he is right to insist that even 'in the heart of the anonymous international shopping mall' there are 'indigenous stories worth protecting and celebrating'. The tales Morrison relays again present the processes of 'mallification' as exacting a heavy psychic toll, with anger, violence, suicide, and revenge looming large, albeit disfigured, in the telling, into grotesquely comic forms. As these outlandish episodes accumulate, they come to feel, as Morrison intends, like small but revealing contributions to something like an alternate history of the present.

The third element of Morrison's book, devoted to an account of the changing forms and functions of shopping malls, succeeds on two fronts. Firstly, it stands as a substantial piece of historical and sociological research, densely-packed with references to scholarly studies of consumer behaviour and burnished with resonant references to celebrated theorists like Walter Benjamin, Jacques Lacan, Herbert Marcuse, and Fredric Jameson. Secondly, and more subtly, these sections' own impassive, scholarly tone permits them to forego the heavy-handed tactics of polemic and simply present, straightforwardly and without evaluative comment, the hair-raising details of how those running malls leverage planning permission, force competitors out of business, exclude 'undesirable' members of the public, and manipulate customers into buying more than they want or require. Morrison's principled anger is, paradoxically, all the more palpable for remaining implicit behind this deadpan prose with its air of authority and objectivity.

Just occasionally, however, an unmistakeably angry, critical, and oppositional voice breaks through, as when Morrison asks a 'dormant' question whose terms run so starkly contrary to all that is commonsensical and taken for granted under the present dispensation as to appear almost meaningless: 'why do we have so many malls, or for that matter, any malls, at all?' If we do have a need for the mall, Morrison suggests in this timely and powerful book, it is a need manufactured by nothing other than the mall itself.

Paul Crosthwaite